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A New Approach to the Holocaust

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Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews

by Peter Longerich

Oxford University Press, 645 pp., \$34.95

Heinrich Himmler: Biographie

by Peter Longerich

Berlin: Siedler, 1,035 pp., \$39.95; \$19.95 (paper)

Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland

by Catherine Epstein

Oxford University Press, 451 pp., \$45.00

The “Final Solution” in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941–1944

by Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, translated from the German by Ray Brandon

Berghahn, 517 pp., \$80.00

It is fruitless to reduce the manifold evil of the Holocaust to a single cause. Ideology, charisma, conformism, hatred, greed, and war were all very important, but each was related to the others and all mattered within rapidly changing historical circumstances. In his profound study *Holocaust*, Peter Longerich puts forward an analysis that includes all these factors and shows how politics or, as he puts it, *Politik*, set them all in motion. In this amplified English edition of his *Politik der Vernichtung* (1998), Longerich preserves the German term *Judenpolitik*, and with good reason. In German *Politik* means both “politics” and “policy,” and the compound noun (*Juden + Politik*) gives a sense of a



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Adolf Hitler congratulating Heinrich Himmler on his appointment to the post of Germany's minister of the interior, 1943

joining of concepts that English cannot quite convey. In Longerich's analysis, *Judenpolitik* has three meanings: German policy toward Jews; the national and international politics of the Jewish question; and the manner in which discrimination against Jews and then their extermination permeated German political life between 1933 and 1945.

Longerich's argument hinges on a distinction between two categories of destructive racial politics. He proposes that Hitler's racist program to bring about a homogeneous Germany and a subjugated eastern empire was intended to be implemented in two ways, "positive" and "negative." The "positive solutions" involved the elevation of the Germans above all others, as they demonstrated their manifest superiority in world culture and on European battlefields. The "negative solutions" required that elements inside and outside the German race that contradicted this vision be removed.

Longerich demonstrates that "positive solutions" were impossible as policy but effective as politics. "Negative solutions" had some promise of success, but, as it turned out, chiefly in combination with ambitious eastern wars. Meanwhile, the politics of destruction in both forms corrupted Germans and non-Germans. The political style of Hitler and other Nazi leaders was to issue general guidelines and to expect subordinates to find the ways to realize them. This meant that participants in Nazi crimes, both before and during the war, acted as creative conformists.

In Longerich's account, *Judenpolitik* helped Hitler to consolidate power after 1933. It was impossible to perfect a German race, but it was possible to implicate Germans in "negative solutions." Concentration camps first punished the Nazis' political enemies, above all Communists and Socialists. They were then expanded in order to segregate and remold people deemed to be social outsiders, such as alcoholics, drug addicts, the chronically unemployed, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The "negative solutions" that functioned well as politics were discriminatory measures applied to a small, loyal, and assimilated minority, the German Jews. Precisely because Jews had done much to create German civilization, the "Jewish spirit" could be blamed for any remaining defects in German culture and science, and Jews in all branches of learning could be purged. Discrimination in universities and schools that was motivated in this way had a large part in allowing the state to control civil society. A law against marriage and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews led to Jewish isolation; Longerich maintains that non-Jews ceased to socialize with Jews by the middle of the 1930s. The Nazi leadership did not really expect mass

participation in planned pogroms such as *Kristallnacht* in 1938: it was enough that thousands of Germans participated, while most remained passive.¹

By 1939 Nazi Germany was a consolidated dictatorship with racially defined enemies who were totally at its mercy. But German racial virtue had been proven to no one, and Nazi racial aims were unachieved. The emigration of many German Jews, painful though it was for those concerned, made almost no difference to the overall population of Jews in Europe. Despite the annexation of Austria and part of Czechoslovakia, no grand colonies had been won. Racial empire would require a war of a very special sort. In August 1939 Nazi Germany entered an alliance with its putative ideological enemy, the Soviet Union, and the following month the Wehrmacht and the Red Army both invaded Poland.

The Nazi faith in German perfectibility seems to have been genuine. Hitler and the Nazi leaders believed in 1939 that a European war would be a grand opportunity to carry out a “positive solution.” War would demonstrate racial superiority, purge Germans of their decadent ways, and start history afresh. Yet as in Germany itself, elusive “positive solutions” gave way quickly to “negative solutions,” though now with far greater violence. Specially assigned German task forces called *Einsatzgruppen* and other units murdered tens of thousands of educated Poles. Still, as Longerich explains in his biography of Heinrich Himmler, the occupation of western Poland in September 1939 seemed to offer the SS leader a new chance at racial utopia. In October Hitler assigned Himmler the task of “consolidation of Germandom,” which proved to be impossible. But its very difficulties gave Himmler continual arguments to expand his own destructive powers.²

After the defeat of Poland, the Germans engaged in racial engineering in the “Warthegau”: lands of western Poland, including the major Polish cities of Poznań and Łódź, that were annexed to the Reich (see the map below). The civilian governor of the Warthegau, Arthur Greiser, is the subject of a valuable new biography by Catherine Epstein. She argues that Greiser, a weak man who had borrowed money from his Jewish brother-in-law to buy a boat, made himself into the kind of racist that his movement needed. Lacking other patrons within the Nazi leadership, Greiser fastened upon Himmler, who gave him a gelded fox as a pet and the mission of making Polish territories German. In the conquered east, the SS and the civilian Nazi Party leadership were often rivals for power; in the Warthegau, Epstein writes, the cooperation was harmonious. But even when state power and racial imperialism coalesced, there remained the reality that the Warthegau was home to some 4.2 million Poles, 400,000 Jews, and only 325,000 Germans.



Mike King

How then to consolidate Germandom? Himmler and Greiser imagined a “positive solution” in the form of immigration of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe, whose settlement was to increase the numbers of Germans in the Warthegau, changing its racial makeup. In 1939 and 1940 Germans living in eastern Poland or in the Baltic States, the lands annexed by Germany’s Soviet ally, feared persecution by the Soviets. At Berlin’s request Stalin agreed to permit their immigration “home to the Reich.” Although initial plans for the ethnic cleansing of the Warthegau had emphasized Jews, Polish farmers were now deported in order to make farmland available to Germans. By the end of the war, some 300,000 Poles had been forcibly deported to the General Government, the German colony east of the Warthegau composed of occupied Polish lands not annexed to the Reich. Another 450,000 Poles had been sent to the Reich itself as forced labor, some 200,000 had been internally displaced within the Warthegau, and some 20,000 had been selected for racial assimilation.

Under Greiser’s rule, the Polish majority in the Warthegau was treated colonially as “protected subjects,” and subjected to a harsh legal regime. Smuggling flour was punished by death. Poles had to observe curfews and give up their places in public transport to Germans. Polish children were to be taught an ungrammatical pidgin German in school, so that they could take orders but would always appear inferior. No provision was made for the continuation of Polish Catholicism. Instead, priests

were persecuted: of the 828 clerics in the pre-war Poznań Archdiocese, Epstein records, 451 were sent to concentration camps or prison, 120 were deported, and seventy-four were dead by the end of the war. The cathedral in Poznań was used to store furniture. The synagogue was converted into a swimming pool.

The experience in the Warthegau revealed the practical problems of the most important “negative solution,” the Final Solution. In late 1939 the plan was to send the Jews of Central Europe (including the Warthegau) to a reservation in the General Government. But the Nazi leadership there resisted this idea, and Hitler himself came to see the General Government as the staging ground for a later invasion of the Soviet Union. In early 1940, the German leadership tried to persuade its Soviet ally to take two million Jews from Polish territory; Stalin refused. After the fall of France in June 1940, the Nazis made plans for the mass deportations of Jews to Madagascar, a French possession. British control of sea lanes made this impossible. Thus when Greiser confined the Jews of Łódź to a ghetto in February 1940, his assumption was that these people would be shortly dispatched to some other territory. As the successive deportation schemes proved impossible, Greiser began treating the ghetto as a work camp. By 1941, the initial project of turning the Warthegau into a German land had devolved into a mixture of forced population movements, apartheid, and ghettos.³

Like Hitler’s domination of Germany, his war against Poland failed to bring any satisfactory racial solution. All of its shortcomings would be overcome, the Nazis thought, after the Germans won their true war of destiny in the east, against the USSR. Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 was to be the grand struggle for existence of the German people, the racial war against (as Nazis saw it) a Jewish empire, a war that would yield valuable colonies, rehabilitate the German soul, and favor German procreation.

As the Wehrmacht entered the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the German leadership was animated by four overlapping visions: a lightning war that would destroy the USSR in a matter of weeks; a Hunger Plan that would divert foodstuffs to Germany and starve some thirty million people in the succeeding months; a *Generalplan Ost* for the deportation, assimilation, enslavement, or murder of the remaining population in the succeeding years; and a Final Solution, now generally depicted as the deportation of Jews eastward beyond the lands conquered by Germany in the war.⁴

The *Einsatzgruppen* had no order to kill all Soviet Jews when the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union. They at first behaved much as they had in Poland in 1939, killing groups of civilians identified as political threats (now including male Jews of military age). But very quickly, in July 1941, Himmler had his Waffen-SS murder Jewish women and children. Himmler was asserting control of racial policy in the occupied Soviet Union by using his SS and soon thereafter his police forces to carry out mass exterminations of Jews. As Longerich's biography of Himmler reveals, Himmler's two roles are especially important to the dialectic of Longerich's argument. He was regarded as responsible for German racial consolidation, the "positive solution," but in fact controlled the coercive power needed for the crucial "negative solution," the mass murder of Jews that we call the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, Germany's allies in the invasion of the USSR, argues Longerich, began to carry out the version of the Final Solution of which they seem to have been apprised, driving Jews to the east. Hungary's expulsion of thousands of Jews from lands it had annexed from eastern Czechoslovakia into German-occupied Soviet Ukraine created a problem of Jewish refugees for the Germans, who solved it by mass murder. At Kamianets Podil'skyi in what had been the southwestern Soviet Ukraine in late August 1941, the Germans for the first time shot Jews (most of them refugees from lands taken by Hungary) in very large numbers, killing 23,600 people. This massacre was organized by Friedrich Jeckeln, subordinate to Himmler as the higher SS and police leader for the region.

Driving Jews eastward was not a feasible way to eliminate them because no lightning victory came and the Soviet state did not collapse. As Longerich sees matters, Hitler chose in the autumn of 1941 to proceed with plans for the Final Solution by deportation anyway, shipping German Jews to the east despite the absence of a victory, and forcing local SS and civilian authorities (people such as Jeckeln or Greiser) to deal with new arrivals in conditions of overcrowding and chaos. Whereas other historians have linked Hitler's decision to Stalin's deportation of Volga Germans or a euphoria of victory associated with the German autumn offensive known as Operation Typhoon, Longerich emphasizes Britain's decision to remain in the war and increasing American involvement on the side of the British. In his account, Hitler believed that suffering but surviving Jews could be used as hostages to deter London and Washington from war. Whatever the reason, the deportation of Central European Jews to the east was a crucial moment, since it indicated that the Final Solution would take place during the war, and established a link between prior deportation plans and ongoing mass shooting.

The August 1941 massacre at Kamianets Podils'kyi in Ukraine had set a precedent. Its main organizer, Friedrich Jeckeln, was reassigned to the north, to serve as the higher police and SS leader at Riga. His tasks there included liquidation of the ghetto established in the occupied Latvian capital—taken first by the Soviets during the German-Soviet alliance, and now occupied by the Germans. Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein's excellent study of the Riga ghetto, informed by Eastern European sources and available now in English translation, provides a precise and ghastly description of what this meant for those local Jews. With laudable thoroughness, they describe the organized shooting of Jews, the first form of industrial-scale mass murder.

On November 30, 1941, Jews in groups of five hundred or a thousand were assembled in the ghetto by Germans with Latvian assistance. The aged and the sick were shot on the spot. Those too weak to march for two hours carrying possessions were shot along the way. As the Jews approached the Rumbula Forest, a cordon of Germans and Latvians narrowed the marching column into a single-file line. Jews left their suitcases at a first station, their clothing at a second station, and their remaining valuables at a third. Then they walked on ramps down to pits, lay down on the ground or more likely on the corpses already beneath them, and were shot in the back of the neck. Some 14,000 Jews were shot on November 30 alone; in all some 27,800 were killed in this episode of mass murder.⁵

East of the 1939 border between Germany and the Soviet Union, in places like Riga, Jews were generally shot. West of that border, for example in the Warthegau and the General Government, they were generally gassed. As Epstein shows in her biography of Greiser, whatever the final method of murder, the logic of escalation in the second half of 1941 was similar. Unwelcome transports of Jews from Germany and elsewhere in Central Europe generated mass killing of Jews held in ghettos. When Greiser learned in September 1941 that German Jews would be deported to the Łódź ghetto, he apparently bargained with his superiors for the authority to kill Jews and Roma who were already there to make room for the newcomers.

In the Warthegau, the Germans had already used gas vans to asphyxiate inmates of Polish hospitals. The police crew charged with this operation was now given the responsibility for gassing Jews. Gas vans were parked at a manor house at Chełmno—a town in western Poland thirty-seven miles northwest of Łódź—and used there from December 8, 1941, to murder Jews. By killing the sick, the young, and the old, Greiser made Łódź into a kind of work camp. This would last until

1944, when he finally yielded to pressure from Himmler to send most of Łódź's Jewish inhabitants to Auschwitz.⁶

War against the Soviet Union did not transform politics as the Nazis imagined it would. Though the Germans starved more than four million Soviet citizens, the Hunger Plan as such could not be carried out. *Generalplan Ost*, though implemented on a small scale, became a distant dream. The Final Solution took place, but not according to plan. Rather than being a war aim, it became part of the war itself. Hitler in August 1941 spoke of a war against Jews. That December, after the Soviets began a counteroffensive at Moscow and the Americans entered the war, Hitler spoke of a world war brought about by the Jews. He recalled his "prophecy" of January 1939, when he had promised extermination to the Jewish race should Jews foment a world war. Killing was not the original technique of the Final Solution, but it was the technique whose efficacy Himmler proved. Longerich's magnificent biography of Himmler reveals him navigating among different policies of destruction,⁷ finding the ways to match Hitler's immediate needs with Germany's practical possibilities. The grand "positive solution" of a racially ennobling war gave way to the total "negative solution" of the planned destruction of the people defined as the chief enemy, the Jews.

Historians of Germany have pushed the date of the crucial decision to eliminate all Jews later and later, until it seems that it could go no further. They debate whether the critical moment was June 1941 (which few now believe), or October 1941, or December 1941. Longerich calmly pushes through late 1941 and January 1942, the month of the Wannsee Conference, without recording a moment from which the Holocaust as total extermination was inevitable. He believes that there was in fact no crucial moment when Hitler decided, or communicated his decision, to kill all Jews under German control. In his view, "we should abandon the notion that it is historically meaningful to try to filter the wealth of available historical material and pick out a single decision" that led to the Holocaust.

Longerich grants the significance of Greiser's murder of Jews by gas at Chelmno in December 1941, but finds another crucial moment of escalation in spring 1942, when he records a second wave of shootings in the east, the construction of a large death factory at Treblinka for the destruction of the Warsaw Jews, and the addition of a gas chamber to the concentration camp at Auschwitz for the murder of the Jews of Silesia. He believes that the assassination of Himmler's most important associate, Reinhard Heydrich, on June 4, 1942, led to the acceleration of gassing throughout the General Government. "Ours is the holy duty to avenge his death," said Himmler,

and in July he ordered the complete liquidation of the Jews within the General Government by the end of the year.

Himmler also went to Auschwitz that month and witnessed gassings. It was only in the summer of 1942, Longerich maintains, that mass killing was finally understood as the realization of the Final Solution, rather than as an extensively violent preliminary to some later program of slave labor and deportation to the lands of a conquered USSR. To see mass killing as itself the Final Solution was, in Longerich's view, to abandon the prospect of any military victory over the USSR in the near future. Here I would have been grateful for more detail about the summer 1942 offensive (and indeed Soviet actions generally) in the Soviet Union, which, like the autumn 1941 offensive, was perhaps more important than Longerich credits. In Longerich's account, as in Holocaust history generally, the Soviet Union figures as a kind of external constraint, enabling or disabling German policies, rather than as an agent in its own right.

In July 1942, the German leadership approached its allies about the deportation of their Jews to death facilities. In this scheme, the attempt to involve Germany's allies had a political motive. Just as participation in anti-Semitic discrimination bound Germans to the Nazi regime in the 1930s, so the cooperation of Germany's allies in the Holocaust would make surrender impossible for them in the 1940s. Others seemed to share this calculus. Italy and Bulgaria, the states that resisted German demands for Jews, did in fact change sides. Romania had its own program for the mass killing of Jews, but reversed its policies as the tide of war visibly turned in 1942, and then it changed sides in 1944. Hungary deported Jews from territories it annexed from dismembered Czechoslovakia in 1939 and forced native Jews into brutal labor duty where many died, but the regime declined to send Jews to the death factories. The deportations of Jews under Hungarian rule began in 1944 after the Hungarian regime tried and failed to reverse alliances, seeking support from the Allies; the Germans then invaded and installed their own regime.⁸

The emerging image of a Holocaust resulting from political motives denies Longerich's readers the expected moment of doom at the bottom of a descending narrative arc. More obstinately than almost all other historians, Longerich resists the temptation to insert a novelistic climax into the history of the extermination of the Jews. Yet nothing about Longerich's account questions the importance of the Führer and his ideology. On the contrary, he shows precisely how Hitler achieved his racist ends, emphasizing that his political style required of the Germans not just obedience

but initiative, and showing how the pattern of creative conformity established before 1939 enabled bloody escalation during the war.

Longerich unites ideology and institutions within an interpretation sufficiently flexible to connect Nazi aspirations to Nazi policies. He thereby avoids both extremes of the debates about timing: the popular assumption that after Hitler's rise to power in 1933 everything was inevitable, and the scholarly search for a particular moment in 1941 when the definitive decision was made. Instead, he shows how the ideological vision of a world without Jews could motivate both successful domestic politics and catastrophic war while in both cases furthering the Holocaust.²

The search for a "positive solution" of purified Germans did not work within Germany itself, but fostered the political habits of consolidation through scapegoating and murder as the response by lower cadres to imprecise signals from above. "Negative solutions" were easier to undertake during wartime, but impossible to implement fully against Slavic populations who far outnumbered the German colonizers. Slavs were killed in the millions, but never targeted for complete elimination like the Jews. Germany's racist colonization provided opportunities for men such as Greiser, who was not among the most convinced anti-Semites, and Jeckeln, who was. Their actions can be seen as creative obedience to Himmler, who was in his turn accommodating Hitler.

Longerich's impressive study of *Judenpolitik* is not a detailed recounting of the Holocaust, and makes no claim to take account of the perspective of the Jews who died and the neighbors who watched, collaborated, or more rarely rescued. But it supplies the best account we have of the relationship between anti-Semitism and mass murder, and conveys a melancholy plausibility.

1. 1

As Terry Martin has argued, Soviet history, though on the basis of social rather than racial ideals, also displays a shift from "positive" to "negative solutions," from the affirmative action of the 1920s to the ethnic shooting actions of the 1930s. See *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Cornell University Press, 2001). For recent documentation of the bloodiest of these, see *Wielki terror: operacja polska 1937–1938*, edited by Jerzy Bednarek et al. (Warsaw: IPN, 2010). ↵

2. 2

On German attitudes as war approached, see Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (Penguin, 2005). ↩

3. 3

The Warthegau has a crucial part in the argument of Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008). ↩

4. 4

I relate these plans to the Holocaust and to Soviet realities in chapters five, six, seven, and eight of *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010). Though, following Saul Friedländer, I assign more importance to December 1941, my interpretation was much influenced by Longerich's two books under review here; in a third, *Der ungeschriebene Befehl: Hitler und der Weg zur "Endlösung"* (Munich: Piper, 2001), Longerich suggestively noted the significance of German–Soviet interaction. ↩

5. 5

Jeckeln also had German Jews shot, which exceeded his authority. ↩

6. 6

On conditions in the ghetto, see Andrea Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt: Lebensbedingungen, Selbstwahrnehmung, Verhalten* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006). ↩

7. 7

The book bears comparison to Ian Kershaw's monumental *Hitler: A Biography* (Norton, 2008) and deserves translation. ↩

8. 8

It would have been interesting to know how Longerich would handle the politics of German alliance negotiations with Poland between 1934 and 1939 and with the Soviet Union in 1939. On issues of Hungarian and Romanian sovereignty and the Holocaust, see Holly Case, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II* (Stanford University Press, 2009). Bulgaria did deport the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia. ↩

9. 9

Another essay would be required to explain the recent parallel literature on the political economy of the Holocaust, from Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944*

(Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999) through Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (Viking, 2007). ↵

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